

Making Sense

‘Making Sense’, the title of this issue of *Sofia*, ranges from seeking, to seeing to doing. It covers trying to understand or interpret, arrange coherently, or it may mean something is reasonable, is the right action to take. We might say: ‘I am trying to make sense of this happening/text.’ Or ‘Now I see’. Or ‘That makes sense. It is the right thing to do.’

This *Sofia* has a wide range of articles relating to the theme. Digby Hartridge begins our first one: ‘In my eightieth year in the middle of a pandemic, what I always thought to be my duty, to make sense of existence, took on a new urgency.’ He goes on to try to make sense of his own life and of the world in which we are living now. ‘By chance,’ he says, ‘I was born during the Second World War into a privileged ruling class and into a land isolated from the worst of the hostilities, Southern Rhodesia. He studied Social Anthropology at university, disagreed with the ruling white majority but found he could make ‘little difference by arguing with my contemporaries’. He is suddenly reminded of the feeling of helplessness he felt then when facing the urgent questions of today when ‘climate change dominates intelligent discourse’, and most of us may acknowledge capitalism’s excesses but ‘do *all of us* not satisfy ourselves with half measures?’

In our second article Martin Spence, who led the discussion at the SOF Annual Zoom conference on Terry Eagleton’s talk on the Death of God, gives his own response to Eagleton. He argues that our humanity ‘expresses itself as a transcendent impulse, an ever-present urge to reach out for meaning beyond the immediacy of daily life’. So religion, ‘far from being the *source* of transcendent value is a particular form of *response*’ to that human urge’.

In our third piece David Rhodes offers some comments on the assertion: ‘We created religion to explain stuff we didn’t understand’. That is followed by David Lambourn’s ‘Letter to Mark’, which asks about the meaning (intention and interpretation) of Mark’s Gospel. He also gives

‘Mark’s reply’. Then Frank Walker writes about ‘Horror and Hope at Christmas’.

Kathryn Southworth revisits *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James. The final episode of the BBC dramatisation of the novel was broadcast in 1968, when Kathryn became sixteen. She says 1968 was an *annus mirabilis*, a year of choices and intense experiences. ‘How could a young woman not identify with [the heroine] Isobel Archer’s sense of herself as “someone in particular”, a work in progress, and with her zest to explore the world and all its possibilities?’

There are the usual letters, reviews and John Pearson’s *As I Please*, this time on ‘Bucket Lists’. In this issue we are particularly privileged to have an extended review by Keith Sutherland, the founder and director of Imprint Academic, *Sofia*’s consistently excellent, long-term printer. Sutherland’s review is of a new book by John Higgs: *William Blake vs the World*. Like Sutherland, Blake himself, of course, was a printer.

What Eagleton and Spence refer to as transcendence relates closely to what Blake calls the Poetic Genius (and also to what his contemporary Coleridge calls ‘the shaping spirit of imagination’). Blake believed ‘all deities reside in the human breast’ and concludes his piece *All Religions are One: The Voice of one crying in the Wilderness*:

As all men are alike (though infinitely various), so all religions and, as all similars, have one source. The true Man is the source, he being the Poetic Genius.

The ‘most high’ belongs to the realm of the human Poetic Genius or imagination. Sutherland quotes Henry Crabb Robinson questioning Blake on the divinity of Jesus Christ and Blake’s answer: ‘Blake replied “He is the only God”, but then added “And so am I and so are you”.

Christmas celebrates the story of God's descent to become a newborn human baby at the lowest point of the year, the Winter Solstice. He becomes the prototype of 'the human form divine', a vision of human potential. Although we can do and have done so much harm, we still also have that potential for good, envisioned by the human Poetic Genius. As Blake says in his poem *Jerusalem* (plate 27):

The Divine Vison still was seen
Still was the Human Form Divine,
Weeping in weak and mortal clay,
O Jesus, still the Form was thine.

And thine the Human Face and thine
The human Hands and Feet and Breath,
Entering through the Gates of Birth
And passing through the Gates of Death.

Leading up to Christmas, Advent yearns for the coming, the realisation, of 'the human form divine' in each of us and in human society. It is a season of hope, a story of hope – that prevails. As our days rush down into the dark, at the deepest point, new light and life is born.

On the final seven days (17– 23 December), the 'Great O antiphons', sung at Vespers or

Evensong, each summons Christ, the embodiment of 'the human form divine', by a different title: 'O Come':

- **S**apientia (O Wisdom)
- **A**donai (O Lord)
- **R**adix Jesse (O Root of Jesse)
- **C**lavis David (O Key of David)
- **O**riens (O Daystar Rising)
- **R**ex Gentium (O King of Nations)
- **E**mmanuel (God with Us)

The initial letter of each title forms a reverse acrostic. EROS CRAS: I WILL BE TOMORROW. At the Solstice on 21st December the new sun is invoked as the sun of justice:

○ Daystar Rising, shining of eternal light and sun of justice, Come and give light to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.

The very first O antiphon invokes Wisdom (*Sapientia/Sofia*):

○ Wisdom, proceeding from the mouth of the most high, reaching from end to end, arranging everything strongly and sweetly, Come and teach us to have good sense.

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